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ABSTRACT

Current trends and issues in education, and especially in school counseling, indicate the importance of collaborating for student success. With the proliferation of computer and networking technologies at their fingertips, school counselors can effectively forge greater collaborations among various stakeholders by creating virtual communities--electronically supported "meeting places." This article highlights how school counselors can benefit from virtual communities, how to recognize virtual communities, and the advantages and disadvantages of virtual communities. (Contains 18 references.) (GCP)

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Chapter One

Building Virtual Communities in School Counseling

by Russell A. Sabella and Bill Halverson

Introduction

What images or ideas do you have when you think about what the Internet can do for you in your work, or perhaps in your personal life? A first thought may be how the Internet makes readily available a vast amount of information and resources. Upon further reflection, you may recognize how the Internet facilitates the sharing of ideas, storing data, and communicating with others. Some may even see the Net as a global medium that brings people together in a shared environment to exchange ideas, learn, and engage in collaborative decision making. Shared environments on the Net are known by many names of which the most popular include online community, virtual community, virtual village, or invisible city.

Virtual communities have already been developed for a sundry of interests, such as in colleges to foster closer relationships among their graduates (Leibowitz, 1999); among media companies to unite fans of their shows (Gross, 1999; Lucas, 1999); for the disabled so that they may more easily overcome barriers to daily living (Kahn, 2000); with people interested in weight loss (Zetlin & Pfleging, 2001); for linking seriously ill children to play together from their respective hospital beds in a three dimensional interactive virtual community (Holden, Bearison, Rode, Rosenberg, & Fishman, 1999); to foster mentorship and support among mothers who are practicing physicians or medical students (Greenwood, 2000); providing online support for people who share a terrible fear of the dentist (Greenwood, 2000); or for teenagers to provide feedback for each other's writing works (Kehus, 2000) to name but a very few.

The true value of virtual communities came to light in the wake of the terrorist attacks occurring on September 11th, 2001. After this time, it is estimated that 33% of American Internet users read or posted material in chat rooms, bulletin boards, or other online forums. Although many early posts reflected outrage at the events, online discussions soon migrated to grieving, discussion and debate on how to respond, and information queries about the suspects and those who sponsored them (Horrigan, 2001). More than ever before, the Internet became a meeting place where people could gain solace more readily and easily than before.

School Counselors Can Benefit from Virtual Communities

School counselors also stand to benefit from developing virtual communities to better connect with important groups – students, parents, administrators, teachers, and others – as part of a comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling program. Indeed, effective school counseling programs are a collaborative effort between and among many important groups of people. Staff and counselors value and respond to the diversity and individual differences in our societies and communities (ASCA, 1997). One of the school counselor's roles is to coordinate resources and services to best assist children and families in fulfilling their needs. To effectively be student advocates, school counselors must work cooperatively with other individuals and organizations to promote the academic, career, and personal/social development of children and youth (ASCA, 1999). Creating and facilitating virtual communities can significantly increase a school counselor's ability to effectively provide a collaborative environment among important constituents. The remainder of this article focuses on the nature of virtual communities, including advantages and disadvantages, and resources that school counselors can use to begin building their own virtual communities at little or no cost.

How do I recognize a virtual community when I see one?

Virtual communities seem to be a quickly developing phenomenon which makes defining them difficult. Some say virtual community is but a learning tool, a tool of engagement, or a tool to get people together. Others

see it as a process, that is, an educational support process or way to strengthen idea development. According to Paccagnella (1997), "virtual communities" has become a fashionable term which is used as a useful metaphor to indicate the articulated pattern of relationships, roles, norms, institutions, and languages developed online. In 1993, Rheingold described the idea intuitively when he wrote, "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."

The Foundation for Community Encouragement (see http://www.fce-community.org/) defines community as the following: "A community is a group of two or more people who have been able to accept and transcend their differences regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds (social, spiritual, educational, ethnic, economic, political, etc.). This enables them to communicate effectively and openly and to work together toward goals identified as being for their common good." Using this definition makes the proliferation of community over the Internet more understandable because the Net is especially good at minimizing the effect of personal traits such as ethnicity on interaction.

In a study which investigates the practices and conditions that lead to a sense of community in middle schools, Belenardo (2001) uses the term "community" to refer to a shared psychological sense of coherence at a school. A sense of community, he writes, is the presence of beliefs, feelings, and relationships that connect members of a school community to each other; it provides a sense of belonging to something that transcends the situational relationships in an organization.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Communities

Each application within a virtual community (e.g., e-mail, listserv, webcam, bulletin board, chatroom) has its own advantages and disadvantages (White, 2001). As a whole, however, virtual communities afford the following advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

- It is a place where people and information can be accessed anytime throughout the day or night, no matter what day of the year.
- Participants and experts from throughout the world can connect to orchestrate "brainstorming" sessions. Because participants' expertise varies, ideas are typically more creative and innovative. New and varied perspectives can contribute to more effective problem solving and decision-making.
- Virtual communities are cost effective as most of them are free.
- Virtual communities can be organized and conducted in most any language and in multiple translations. Relatedly, virtual communities can foster connections with others of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, which, without the Internet, would probably not occur.
- Some people report that they feel less inhibited in their interactions in a virtual community.
- Many virtual communities are thought to have motivated renewed interest and action in citizenry, advocacy, and volunteerism.

Conversely, several disadvantages also exist and include:

- In public virtual communities, you sometimes may not know exactly with whom you are really interacting.
- Some participants may have hidden agendas or ill-conceived motivations for participating in a virtual community.
- Navigating through more intricate communities or communities that are allowed to grow too large can be chaotic and confusing.
- Some would argue that virtual communities contribute to a growing problem of social isolation.
- Although much easier today, one needs a relatively sophisticated level of technological expertise to create and participate in a virtual community.
- Public communities may preclude more sensitive, yet needed interactions.
- Potential members may not have the requisite hardware or software (e.g., webcam) to fully participate.

What do the most successful virtual communities include?

The most successful and sustainable virtual communities consist of many of the same components that are characteristic of successful "live" communities. They include foundation systems, participant goals, and shared online protocols (Rheingold, 1993). Foundation systems include appropriate computer hardware and software systems, the nuts and bolts of the community, which facilitates a seamless flow of multiple social interactions. Foundation systems may include webcams, music and video players, instant messaging, chat rooms, bulletin board systems, database (for collection and processing of data among members), polling, file and photo sharing, listserv, and application sharing. A second component of successful virtual communities are participant goals which help community members focus on a shared interest or area of expertise. Participant goals reflect a common desire for a particular knowledge base and related skill set. Finally, similar to live communities, virtual communities share a set of protocols or, simply stated, rules, guides and norms which direct members to interact with civility and organization.

Where do I find current counseling virtual communities?

According to Horrigan (2001), 84% of Internet users, or about 90 million Americans, say they have used the Internet to contact or get information from a group. How do such people learn about relevant groups? For one, relevant information about virtual communities is now typically provided by organizations such as professional organizations, churches, or schools. Many virtual communities are actually created by such groups as a way to better connect with their members. For instance, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has started and is continually building an online community for its membership. In this virtual community, members can contact each other through a directory, subscribe to e-mail listservs, read the ASCA magazine, and learn about valuable resources. Some businesses have created online communities for counselors such as the one found at Teachers.net (see http://teachers.net/mentors/counseling/) which includes an electronic bulletin board, columns, lesson plans, calendar, and much more. Similarly, myschoolonline.com (see http://myschoolonline.com) allows counselors to use online interactive tools to create content (e.g., calendars, newsletters, portfolio) for various groups of interest.

A second way to learn about relevant virtual communities is by using a specialized search engine such as one or more of the following:

http://www.chatlist.com/
http://ecultures.homestead.com/search.html
http://groups.yahoo.com
http://www.topica.com
http://www.lsoft.com/catalist.html
http://www.tile.net/

How Do I Create My Own Virtual Community?

In general, there are two options for building and operating a virtual community – create one on your own or partner with an existing community host. The latter option is preferable because to build a community on your own requires a great deal of technological expertise and expense, especially for purchasing needed software. Instead, you can create a virtual community using existing tools provided by a host such as one of the following:

http://www.mylearningplace.com
http://www.delphi.com/dir-delphi
http://groups.yahoo.com
http://www.schoolnotes.com
http://www.topica.com

Your virtual community may include several components from several different hosts. For instance, you may include an online course in which case you can use various free online "course development" applications such as http://education.yahoo.com, www.blackboard.com, or http://www.webct.com. In addition, you might add a discussion board or "knowledge thread" from one of these free chat room service providers: http://www.ezboard.com, http://groups.yahoo.com, http://chatroomweb.com, http://www.talkcity.com, http://www.habbohotel.com, http://clubs.yahoo.com, http://groups.aol.com, http://www.myassembly.com, or http://groups.google.com.

Conclusion

When ARPANET, the Internet's precursor, came online in 1969, it did not have a foundational moment like the telephone's, when Alexander Graham Bell ordered his associate Thomas Watson: "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you." That sentence signaled an era of person-to-person communication over distance. In contrast, ARPANET connected a community. In its earliest days, it was a community of computer researchers at major U.S. universities working on similar problems. Since then, the Internet's capability of allowing many-to-many communications has fostered communities of various sizes and sorts (Horrigan, 2001). The rapidly growing development of virtual community networks seems to be having a binding effect on increasingly fragmented communities and also providing a voice for segments of society that have been traditionally ignored.

Virtual communities are already demonstrating that they can help to lower the barriers to democratic participation (e.g., ITTA, 2000; Oldenburg, 1999). According to Allen (1994), current trends and issues in education, and specifically in school counseling, indicate the importance of collaborating for student success. With the proliferation of computer and networking technologies at their finger tips, school counselors can effectively forge greater collaborations among various stake holders by creating virtual communities – electronically supported "meeting and sharing places."

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